

**Parallels and challenges between municipal policies and international  
guidelines for early childhood**

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore parallels and challenges between municipal policies and international guidelines focused on early childhood, directing its attention towards the development of a comparative analysis. In this regard, the construction of an analytical framework that establishes relationships between the Municipal Plan for Early Childhood of the Municipality of São Paulo (2018-2030) and the global initiative Urban95 by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation guidelines, which addresses the inclusion of the child's perspective in cities. The exploratory research method used involves public administration reports examination, including the plan and its annual assessments. During the research process, key information was extracted focusing on the identification of laws, regulations, action plans, and projects aimed at advancing early childhood care, with the aim of validating and expanding the understanding of the subject. In a context where cities must provide conducive environments for child development, the study seeks to understand how municipal policies align with international guidelines. The results highlight the advances and challenges resulting from inequalities in the city of São Paulo in the scope of attention to early childhood, emphasizing the need for coordinated and interdisciplinary public policies in this agenda.

**KEYWORDS:** Early Childhood. Public Policies. International Guidelines.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The healthy and full development of children in early childhood is a concern in political and social agendas globally. This crucial phase of life is characterized by rapid physical, cognitive, and emotional growth, shaping the foundation for lifelong well-being and success. The effective implementation of public policies aimed at this age group faces complex and multifaceted challenges, many of which are intrinsically linked to the urban context.

Considering this perspective, urban space directly influences children's experience and development, so investing in early childhood involves not only providing access to quality services such as education and health. It is also necessary to create safe and stimulating environments that foster exploration, play, and social interaction. Additionally, it is essential to provide support to caregivers, for example, through assistance services, adequate transportation, guaranteeing rights, and reducing inequalities.

This article is dedicated to an in-depth investigation of the parallels and challenges between municipal policies and international guidelines aimed at early childhood. Urban95 is a global initiative of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation that seeks to place children under five needs and perspectives at the center of urban planning and decision-making in cities. The name of the initiative refers to the average height of a three-year-old child, which is 95 centimeters, thus representing the perspective and experience of young children in cities.

In an increasingly urbanized world, cities play a fundamental role in children's living conditions and in promoting their healthy development. Since 2013, the municipality of São Paulo has integrated actions focused on early childhood into its government goals, as evidenced by the launch of the *São Paulo Carinhosa* Program, followed by the introduction of the Municipal Plan for Early Childhood 2018-2030 and the Educating Territories Program. These initiatives reflect the commitment made by several countries in 2015 as part of the Agenda 2030 to promote the comprehensive development of children from the earliest years of life.

In this sense, this study directs its attention to the city of São Paulo, a metropolis facing a range of complex challenges regarding the promotion of child well-being. The center of this study lies

in the comparative analysis between the goals of the Municipal Plan for Early Childhood of the Municipality of São Paulo, proposed for the period from 2018 to 2030, and the guidelines outlined by the global initiative Urban95 of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation.

The methodological approach employed is exploratory, using reports from the public administration, such as the Municipal Plan for Early Childhood of the Municipality of São Paulo and its annual assessments, as sources of information. These documents provide a comprehensive overview of the policies and actions undertaken in the field of early childhood, enabling a thorough and comparative analysis.

Through the identification of significant actions and challenges inherent to this agenda, the primary goal is to provide valuable insights to inform decision-making and enhance future strategies. Ultimately, this article intends to enrich the dialogue on the intersection between local policies and global guidelines for promoting a healthy and vibrant early childhood in the city of São Paulo.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Children have been neglected in urban planning, resulting in hostile, unsafe, and poorly adapted environments for their needs. This neglect affects not only children but the community as a whole. Francesco Tonucci (2008) offers a compelling analysis of how cities can be reimagined to better meet children's needs and interests, ensuring a more inclusive urban environment focused on child well-being. The author challenges the traditional notion of urban planning, which often prioritizes the needs of adult men and work-related activities. His approach emphasizes the importance of creating urban spaces where children can explore, play, and interact freely, stimulating cognitive, emotional, and social development. By reconsidering urban planning from children's perspective, his analysis reminds us that a truly inclusive and child-friendly city should accommodate all ages and needs.

The concept: "15-Minute City", developed by Carlos Moreno (2021), proposes the creation of neighborhoods where people's daily needs can be met within a maximum walking distance of 15 minutes, eliminating excessive dependence on motorized vehicles and promoting social interaction, accessibility, and connection with nature. In this context, the child is seen as a sensitive indicator of urban quality, as their activities, needs, and experiences are a direct reflection of the environment in which they live. Thus, the child is considered in the formulation of safe, welcoming, and conducive public spaces for child development. Parks, playgrounds, schools, daycare centers, and cultural spaces are designed to meet the needs of children and their families, promoting interaction, learning, and well-being.

Furthermore, the emphasis on active transportation, such as walking or cycling, not only contributes to children's health and physical development but also fosters autonomy and independence from an early age. The possibility of moving safely and accessibly within the neighborhood allows children to explore, interact with their peers, actively participate in community life, and occupy the streets. This approach recognizes the child as a key agent in urban planning, promoting an environment that responds to their needs and contributes to their healthy and holistic growth. It can be said that Jane Jacobs (2011) already embraced this conception:

The children of the city need a good amount of places where they can play and learn. They need, among other things, opportunities to practice all kinds of sports and exercise physical dexterity - and opportunities more accessible than those they mostly enjoy. At the same time, however, they need a place close to home, outdoors, without a specific purpose, where they can play, move around, and gain insights into the world (JACOBS, 2011, p. 11).

The author emphasizes the crucial need to provide children with multifaceted environments rich in opportunities for play, learning, and development, as opposed to isolated and separate playgrounds. She argued that many conventionally designed playgrounds were monotonous, uninteresting, and often underutilized. She highlighted the importance of integrating children's activities into urban spaces, allowing natural integration with the city instead of confining them to specific play areas.

However, Jacobs (2011) also sheds light on the disparity that often exists between children's demands for accessible and inclusive spaces for their activities and urban realities. The urban context bears the responsibility of encouraging the occupation of spaces that ensure children's full development, as it is an environment where community living is manifested. For children to experience this interaction with the community, the city becomes the central axis for accessing exclusive rights of children and adolescents, as established by the Child and Adolescent Statute (BRASIL, 1990).

The interaction between children and the urban environment exposes social inequalities in different agendas. Thus, the importance of the relationship between public and private spaces to foster care, affection, education, fun, leisure, and community interaction is highlighted. In this sense, Cardoso and Daroda (2011) introduce the concept of "multiple childhoods," which offers an analysis urban space utilization patterns by children in Brazilian cities.

The concept of "multiple childhoods" arises from a reflection on the categorization of children's use of urban space, related to public and private spaces, offered by Karsten (2005), and the various practices of daily commuting, analyzed by Oliveira (2004). The study identifies three categories: (i) children who interact with the environment, walk the streets, use public leisure spaces such as parks and courts for exchanges and community interactions; (ii) those who interact with the street only as a passage between places (private) and almost always travel by vehicle; and, finally, (iii) those in situations of risk, for whom the city becomes a space for survival, inhabiting the streets.

At this point, the perception of the right to community living and the right to the city is emphasized, as it is recognized that the child's development occurs through the occupation of the city, the exercise of walking the streets, coexistence, and exchange with different social actors, whether children, adults, or the elderly, safely and in spaces that promote their development (DIAS, FERREIRA, 2015).

### 3 METHOD

The methodology used in this research is based on an in-depth analysis of the actions developed in the city of São Paulo, focusing on the identification of laws, regulations, action plans, and projects aimed at advancing early childhood. Specifically, this study focuses on the actions carried out by the government, as established in the Municipal Plan for Early Childhood (SÃO PAULO, 2018a). The Municipal Plan has an execution horizon until the year 2030, aligned with the international commitments outlined in the 2030 Agenda. An annual balance is published to monitor the progress of

actions taken in the field of early childhood (SÃO PAULO, 2019a; 2020a; 2021).

The methodological approach employed is exploratory and is based on reports from the public administration, including municipal balances. The research consisted of a thorough analysis of these documents, during which key information was extracted and comparisons with other sources were conducted to validate and deepen understanding of the topic. According to information from the Early Childhood Observatory (2022), approximately 1.1 million children aged 0 to 6 live in the city of São Paulo, accounting for approximately 9.4% of the total population.

Data for this comparative analysis were primarily sourced from official reports and documents, including the Municipal Plan for Early Childhood of São Paulo (SÃO PAULO, 2018a) and its annual assessments for the years 2019, 2020, and 2021 (SÃO PAULO, 2019a; 2020a; 2021). These reports do not follow a single standard, however, each of them presents key aspects that provided the basis for the analysis.

The first report (SÃO PAULO, 2019a) considers the first year of Municipal Plan implementation and identifies the main challenges faced, especially regarding the development of a monitoring and evaluation model. The second report (SÃO PAULO, 2020a) mainly addresses the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and describes the actions taken by the government to address the challenges exacerbated by the crisis, including violence and inequalities. The third report (SÃO PAULO, 2021) provides a more detailed analysis of the goals and strategies outlined in the Municipal Plan and outlines an action plan for the current municipal management period (2021-2024).

The analysis of the collected information in the municipal reports is also enriched by the parallel between municipal action and the guidelines of the global initiative Urban95 of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation (2019; 2022), which recognizes and emphasizes children's experiences in the urban context. The comparative framework between municipal policies and international guidelines was developed to identify parallels and challenges in policies aimed at early childhood in the city of São Paulo. To this end, five analytical axes were selected, extracted from the guidelines of the Urban95 initiative (BERNARD VAN LEER FOUNDATION, 2019; 2022): (i) decision-making based on concise and integrated data; (ii) creation of an urban environment conducive to healthy child development; (iii) urban mobility for children and caregivers; (iv) access to public services; and (v) social participation.

#### **4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section addresses the results and discussions stemming from the comparative analysis between municipal policies and international guidelines concerning early childhood, focusing on the city of São Paulo.

Considering the first guideline drawn from Urban95, decision-making based on data emerges as a fundamental principle to propel the comprehensive development of children. Moreover, integrated service protocols streamline access to public policies, establishing clear guidelines for referrals and access to various services, such as home visitation, social assistance, and family health. Furthermore, by consolidating databases and monitoring children's progress in municipal services, valuable information is obtained to steer future public policies and enhance the quality of services provided:

We believe in the importance of data collection, pattern recognition, and information utilization for decision-making. When an initiative is data-driven, it provides quality information to the right people at the right time, and they use the data to take action. Data is much more than just numbers; it sparks crucial conversations and contributes to effective decision-making. Obtaining the right data is crucial, but it is most effective when managed by engaged leaders and efficient management systems (FUNDAÇÃO BERNARD VAN LEER, 2019, p. 35).

The progress made by São Paulo's metropolis in embracing interdisciplinary approaches backed by data to validate its decisions is noteworthy. The city has established a governance structure composed of interdisciplinary teams, technical advisors, and an Intersectoral Management Committee. Tools such as the “*São Paulo Carinhosa Program*” (SÃO PAULO, 2013), the “*Child and Adolescent Budget*” (SÃO PAULO, 2018b) and the “*Integrated System of Attention to Early Childhood*” (SÃO PAULO, 2020b) have been created, contributing to defining priorities, monitoring service networks, and systematizing information. However, considering the challenges of this agenda in the municipality, it is evident that the implementation of these strategies becomes a complex process due to the multiplicity of actors involved, demanding material, human, and logistical resources.

From the analysis of the second guideline, the importance of contact with the urban environment in the context of healthy child development and the well-being of their caregivers stands out. The presence of natural elements in play environments, such as parks and squares, plays a fundamental role in stimulating the child's exploration and interaction with the environment. Interaction with the urban and natural environment not only opens doors to physical and mental growth but also fosters social and emotional advancement, stimulating curiosity, creativity, and a sense of exploration and independence. Contact with urban and natural elements not only stimulates the imagination but also contributes to building a positive relationship with the surrounding environment, nurturing a sense of appreciation and care from the early years of life (FUNDAÇÃO BERNARD VAN LEER, 2019).

However, the Urban95 approach highlights fundamental challenges that require attention to ensure an environment conducive to child development. The absence of safe public spaces for families, inadequate road safety, and issues related to environmental comfort, including noise levels, heat, and air quality, constitute significant obstacles that have a direct impact on the well-being and quality of life of children and their families. These challenges can not only restrict access to leisure and educational opportunities but also have direct implications for children's health and safety: “The challenges to be addressed must be clear, such as the lack of safe public spaces for families, inadequate road safety, or limited access to health centers and daycare facilities” (FUNDAÇÃO BERNARD VAN LEER, 2019, p. 25).

This aspect is intrinsically linked to urban planning and public policies aimed at promoting an inclusive environment conducive to child growth. With the objective of adapting São Paulo to provide environments for fun and leisure connected with nature, both for children in early childhood and their caregivers, the city has implemented some playful and educational spaces in cultural facilities, carried out a number of works to improve sidewalks, and created some accessible playgrounds in public squares. Additionally, municipal parks with suitable play areas and reading incentive programs have been inaugurated. The interventions can be considered isolated; however, they have not gained scale



yet. During the analyzed period, the pandemic exacerbated children's exposure to electronic devices and also limited intergenerational contact, access to cultural and community spaces, green areas, and experiences in nature.

From the analysis of the third guideline, the importance of mobility for families is highlighted, allowing caregivers and children to walk or cycle to services and leisure spaces:

Anyone who has tried to go somewhere with a curious and energetic two-year-old child, or with a heavy baby in their arms, can attest to this. A good public transportation system is very important, but if you are with a young child, the best option is often to walk safely, comfortably, and quickly. We have developed a concept of a '15-minute neighborhood' where the goal is for families with young children to be able to walk to the services they need within 15 minutes (FUNDAÇÃO BERNARD VAN LEER, 2019, p. 5).

In São Paulo, the implementation of *Territórios Educadores* Program, here translated as Educating Territories Program (SÃO PAULO, 2018a), is a strategy that aims to foster a favorable environment to social relations and interaction with public spaces. This initiative seeks to revitalize the urban space near early childhood education units through road safety interventions and the installation of educational and playful furniture.

International guidelines also emphasize the importance of access to public services and recreational spaces for families, as mentioned in the fourth directive analyzed. This access is crucial for child development and for reducing social inequalities:

Families need support to provide encouraging and responsive care to young children. Whether (and how) caregivers use the services tells us two things: if the services are accessible and if caregivers are integrated into the formal systems of the city and reached by public policies. Assessing the various barriers faced by different caregiver subgroups in accessing services is vital as it allows for further considerations on additional interventions needed to support the most vulnerable (FUNDAÇÃO BERNARD VAN LEER, 2019, p. 7).

However, in São Paulo, challenges persist regarding access to public services, especially for vulnerable groups, and there is a need to define indicators to monitor the achievement of the goals and strategies of the plan citywide, taking into account territorial inequalities.

As the fifth and final guideline analyzed, the active participation of families and children themselves in the development and implementation of public policies has vital importance to foster attention to early childhood. Bernard Van Leer Foundation (2022) recently developed a specific guide to integrate these actors into participatory plans. Participation seeks to align policies with the realities, demands, and expectations of those directly impacted by them, and to strengthen democracy by giving voice to historically excluded groups:

Including communities in the creation and management of these events attracts more participants and enhances the sense of local ownership, promoting greater long-term sustainability of actions[...] Pop-up interventions are an efficient way to test ideas for permanent infrastructures and assess their impact on people's behavior (FUNDAÇÃO BERNARD VAN LEER, 2019, p. 7).

In São Paulo, the Division of Democratic Management and Intersecretarial Programs provides continuous training and awareness-raising to strengthen participation and democratic management. Other measures have been implemented in the city, such as expanding the right to paternity leave for municipal employees (SÃO PAULO, 2019b), extended from twenty days to three months, and the

organization of events such as the “Play Week” and the “IV Municipal Week of Early Childhood”, from August 2nd to 6th, 2021, as in previous years, the event was supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), encouraging family participation.

In addition, there has been more active participation from the Municipal Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents in discussions of the Plan Evaluation Committee and in the development of strategies. Nevertheless, the endeavor proves to be colossal when addressing the integration of children and families in participatory planning and monitoring processes at the municipal level.

Through the construction of a comparative analytical framework, the results establish relationships between monitoring the goals of São Paulo's Municipal Plan for Early Childhood (2018-2030) and the international guidelines of the global Urban95 initiative of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, which emphasizes the inclusion of the child's perspective in cities. Chart 1 presents the international guidelines in the first column, while the second and third columns compare, highlighting parallels and possible challenges.



Chart 1 - Analytical-comparative Table: Urban95 Guidelines and São Paulo's Municipal Plan Goals

Urban95 Guidelines	Municipal Plan Goals	
	Parallels	Challenges
Making data-driven decisions is fundamental for child development, integrating information to guide public policies and improve services.	The city has implemented a solid coordination through interdisciplinary teams, technical advisors, and an Intersectoral Management Committee, as well as created tools such as: (i) Child and Adolescent Budget and (ii) Integrated Early Childhood System.	The implementation of these strategies faces challenges due to their complexity and involvement of multiple actors, requiring material, human, and logistical resources.
Creating suitable public spaces and contact with nature are crucial for child development, driving actions that provide enriching environments for early childhood.	With the aim of creating a favorable environment for recreational and leisure activities in harmony with nature, both for children in early childhood and their caregivers, São Paulo has incorporated some educational and recreational spaces in cultural contexts, improved sidewalks, established accessible areas for recreation in public squares, and inaugurated municipal parks with facilities suitable for play and promoting reading.	Throughout the analyzed period, the pandemic has increased children's exposure to electronic devices and, simultaneously, reduced intergenerational contact, accessibility to cultural and community venues, green spaces, and experiences in nature. To address this situation, it becomes imperative to establish strategies that limit such exposure and mobilize society as a whole to tackle this challenge.
Family mobility is crucial to ensure access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and social assistance. Furthermore, ensuring that children and their caregivers can navigate their daily routines safely, with playful elements and accessibility, is fundamental to promoting children's autonomy.	The implementation of Educating Territories is a strategy aimed at creating an environment conducive to social relations and interaction with public spaces. Specifically, regarding educating territories, the reports indicate progress in road safety projects and educational stations in vulnerable areas.	There is a caveat regarding intersectoral public policies as a tool for reducing inequalities, as strategies that impact the quality of life of children and caregivers, such as mobility, road safety, lighting, paving of streets, and access to public services.
The importance of access to public services and recreational spaces for families is crucial for child development and for reducing social inequalities.	The Plan seeks to manage in an integrated manner the services, benefits, and programs aimed at early childhood. As a first step, in 2021, the implementation process of the Integrated Protocol for Attention to Early Childhood began.	The process is slow and cumbersome. Challenges persist regarding access to public services, especially for vulnerable groups, and there is a need to define indicators to monitor the achievement of the plan's goals and strategies, taking into account territorial inequalities.
Family and children's participation in the construction of public policies are foundational elements for early childhood attention, as they represent stakeholders in this process.	The Division of Democratic Management and Interdepartmental Programs provides ongoing training and awareness-raising to enhance the strengthening of participation and democratic management.	The task is monumental and intricate when it comes to integrating children and families into participatory planning procedures.

Source: Own elaboration.

The comparative analysis between municipal policies focusing on early childhood in São Paulo and the international guidelines of Urban95 has highlighted significant parallels and challenges. The alignment between the strategies implemented through the Municipal Plan and the proposed

guidelines indicates the pursuit of more conducive environments for child development in the city. However, the identified challenges for implementing this agenda and the impacts of the pandemic underscore the need for an integrated approach that is sensitive to the children and their families' demands. These findings emphasize the importance of continuously refining municipal policies for early childhood, aligning them not only with international standards but also with local realities, in order to promote an inclusive and successful urban environment for future generations.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Early childhood is a cross-cutting theme in the global agenda defined by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals - SDGs (ONU, 2015). This commitment made by various countries in 2015 translates into actions taken by the municipality of São Paulo, which since 2013 has included interventions for early childhood care in its government goals, such as the *São Paulo Carinhosa* Program (SÃO PAULO, 2013), followed by the implementation of the Municipal Plan for Early Childhood 2018-2030 and the Educating Territories Program (SÃO PAULO, 2018a; 2019a; 2020a; 2021).

The structuring of public policies for early childhood care in the city of São Paulo dates back to 2013; however, with the establishment of the Municipal Plan for Early Childhood in 2018, there was a clear definition of the government's commitments to the agenda, with the setting of goals and strategies to ensure the rights of children in early childhood. Legal mechanisms such as laws and decrees, as presented throughout the study, are consolidated as an important tool to guarantee that the actions developed are continued, regardless of political management.

Through the research, it was possible to recognize that there is a commitment from the public administration to the agenda and the construction of public policies and measures for the care and protection of early childhood, and that they are aligned with the Urban95 program. However, institutional limitations and difficulties in maintaining the proposals were noticeable, as well as in monitoring and evaluating the data and information by the departments involved in the goals and strategies of the Municipal Plan.

The reduction of inequalities emerges as a fundamental imperative for promoting a more equitable and inclusive urban environment, where all children have equal opportunities. To effectively address this challenge, it is essential to implement continuous monitoring strategies, especially aimed at policies aimed at reducing inequalities. Constant surveillance of these disparities allows the identification of gaps and adaptation of intervention approaches, aiming to achieve more effective and lasting results in building a fairer, more equitable São Paulo, a city that prioritizes the full development of children from the beginning of their lives.

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